

OVERCOMING HARDSHIP

On a tomb in Springfield, Illinois, these words are engraved: “There lies the most perfect ruler of men the world has ever seen. Now, he belongs to the ages.” Of whom was that said? Was it said of one of the great Roman Caesars? Was it said of Napoleon? Of what great man, described as “the most perfect ruler of men the world has ever seen,” were those words spoken? Consider his life just for a moment.

At the age of 9, his mother died.
At 22, he got a job as a store clerk and then was fired.
At 23, he went into debt with another gentleman to buy a store. The other man was not good for his debt, and he had to payoff the entire indebtedness.
At 37, after three tries, he was elected to the U.S. Congress.
At 41, his four-year-old son died.
At 45, he ran for the U.S. Senate and lost.
At 47, he was defeated in his bid to become Vice President of the United States.
At 49, he ran for the U.S. Senate again, and he lost again.
At 51, he was elected the sixteenth President of the United States.
His name: Abraham Lincoln.

The marks of greatness are not suddenly delivered to us without failures, hardships, disappointments, loneliness, and loss. If we were to pick one man of the Bible whose life would fit this story, that man would be Joseph. Looking at Joseph’s life toward the end, when Joseph was next to the ruler of Egypt himself, we can ask, How does he come to be next in power to Pharaoh?

This lesson will be presented in a mosaic. We will see the entire story of Joseph unfold, and we

will see the great providential care of God in a way that is marvelous and inspiring.

ISRAEL AND EGYPT (37—50)

We now come to one of the central purposes of Genesis. It is easy to get Genesis confused. It is easy to think that Genesis was written for a group of reasons that had nothing to do with why the book was written. We said in the very beginning that it tells “the great story.” This is a book about God and man. Chapters 37 through 50 have one central objective: to explain to the reader how Israel went into Egypt. When you begin Exodus, Israel is in Egypt. How in the world did Israel get there? Chapters 37 through 50 were written to show us.

Chapter 37 begins with Israel in Canaan. God is going to take Israel down to Egypt, and we see why. Israel is living in Canaan, which has little isolated tribes and city-states in it. They are being dug up today. Magazines carry articles about the household gods that are being dug up in Canaan. These idols are like the ones that Rachel put in the saddlebags when she left home. Samples of their language and some of their customs are being dug up. They did not worship the one true God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The people of Israel are slowly beginning to assimilate into the Canaanites. They are beginning to think like them. They are beginning to worship their gods.

What will the true and living God do? He is going to remove them from their homes and put them in Egypt where He can get their attention.

Has that not happened to us? When our lives have been going in the wrong direction, He had to get our attention. Israel is losing their contact with God, so God decides to take them to Egypt. They go as a group of loose tribes, but they will come out forged as a great nation, loving and worshipping God and ultimately following God to Canaan.

JOSEPH AND EGYPT (37)

In 37:1-11, Joseph is introduced to us as a seventeen-year-old boy. He has two dreams which are duplicates of each other. As the great Egyptian historian Cyrus Gordon said, this is “typical of ancient Near East literature.”¹ We will find during the rest of the book that there are many dreams, and they are in duplicate. There are two dreams: one by a baker and another by a cupbearer. Pharaoh has two dreams, and Joseph has duplicate dreams. His dreams simply point out, as his sheaf stands and everyone else in the family bows down to him, that he is superior to his mother, his father, and the rest of the family.

Jacob gives Joseph a robe. The robe represents the managerial position in the family. This is not simply a Christmas gift. The robe means that Joseph is the manager of his brothers. Judah, Simeon, and Reuben are all older brothers, and they immediately see the preferential treatment going to this younger brother. He has been given the robe of management, and along with that goes privilege. The brothers become jealous. In 37:12-36, they decide to sell him into slavery to the Midianites. That is the last they will see of him for many, many years. Do not overlook the fact that the Midianites are headed for Egypt.

Now we get to one of the most fascinating things about Genesis—this international picture of nations. Egypt is well to the south of Israel, but notice the contacts between them. Contacts between these ancient nations sometimes took place by military invasion, trade, intermarriage, travel, and in this instance, slavery. Joseph is a worshiper of Yahweh. He apparently speaks some form of Hebrew language. He is seventeen years old and looks and thinks like a Hebrew. He can say that Isaac and Jacob are his grandfather and his father, but now he is in Egypt facing a different religion, a different language, different food,

a different philosophy, a different culture—a totally different place.

AN INTERRUPTION (38)

The story of Joseph is now interrupted, and we have a story within a story. Why? One reason is suspense. Joseph is now down in Egypt, but we will not read any more about Egypt for a chapter. Instead, we will read of the family history of Israel. This is the story of Judah who has three children. Er is the first one who marries and shortly dies. Tamar, his widow, is to then be married to one of the other sons of Judah, but Judah prevents it. She then, seeing what has happened, traps Judah, her father-in-law, into adultery with her and calls for his ring and his staff. He leaves them with her, but more importantly, he has prevented what is called *levirate* responsibility. “Levirate” is built on the Latin word *levir* meaning “brother.” In the ancient times of Israel, if a man dies and leaves his wife childless, his brother is to then marry her and have a child by her to continue the family history. Judah prevents that from happening with his other son. He is trapped into sex with her due to his own weakness. Judah says when she confronts him with the evidence, “She is more righteous than I.” The lesson is clear to the Israelites: “Fulfill your levirate responsibility, no matter how high the cost. If the great Judah could not get away with it, you will not either.”

JOSEPH AND POTIPHAR (39)

Joseph becomes the official to Potiphar, the captain of the guard of Egypt. Potiphar’s wife tries to trap Joseph into fornication. When Joseph runs from her, his coat is left behind. She screams to her husband and accuses Joseph of trying to rape her. Potiphar becomes angry, and he sends Joseph to the prison dungeon of Egypt. The last verse in this chapter reads,

... the Lord was with him; and whatever he did,
the Lord made to prosper (39:23).

JOSEPH AND PRISON (40)

Joseph is now in prison, and we read again of duplicate dreams. The cupbearer sees the dream of three branches of grapes. He squeezes the grapes into the cup and gives it to Pharaoh in the dream. Pharaoh drinks the cup. Joseph says that only God can interpret dreams. What the dream

¹Cyrus Gordon, *Ancient Near East* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1965), 134.

means is this: "The three branches mean three days, and in three days you will be restored to your position as cupbearer, the most trusted position in all of Egypt." The baker comes and says, "I have dreamed that there were three baskets, and the ravens came and ate out of them." Joseph must have shaken his head because he had to tell the baker, "That means in three days the birds will come and eat your flesh as they ate the bread from the baskets in your dream, and you will be killed by Pharaoh." The dreams come true. Joseph had asked the cupbearer to remember when he became restored to his position that he was still in the dungeon in Egypt, but the cupbearer does not remember.

JOSEPH AND PHARAOH (41)

Only when Pharaoh begins to have dreams is Joseph remembered by the cupbearer. Pharaoh sends for Joseph and meets Joseph for the first time.

Then Pharaoh sent and called for Joseph, and they hurriedly brought him out of the dungeon; and when he had shaved himself and changed his clothes, he came to Pharaoh (41:14).

Hebrews do not shave their heads; Egyptians do. In order to look like an Egyptian, Joseph dresses appropriately before Pharaoh. When Joseph leaves the dungeon, he shaves his head, bathes, puts on the appropriate Egyptian clothing, and goes in to meet the greatest leader in the Mediterranean world, Pharaoh. Pharaoh tells of the great story of the seven lean cows in his dream who come up out of the River Nile and eat the seven fat cows, but no magician or wise man in all of Egypt knows the meaning of this. Joseph says the interpretation of dreams belongs to God and tells him, "I am God's man, and I want to tell you what that means. There will be seven years of great growth and plenty in the land of Egypt, followed by seven years of famine. Clearly, it is in the best interest of Egypt, therefore, that during the seven years of plenty there be storehouses of food established for the seven years of famine." God shows Pharaoh, through Joseph, the true meaning of the dream.

And now let Pharaoh look for a man discerning and wise, and set him over the land of Egypt (41:33).

It is at this point that Pharaoh chooses Joseph.

This places Joseph over the entire land of Egypt.

So Pharaoh said to Joseph, "Since God has informed you of all this, there is no one so discerning and wise as you are. You shall be over my house, and according to your command all my people shall do homage; only in the throne I will be greater than you" (41:39, 40).

Pharaoh is beginning to use God-language, the language of a Jew, of a Hebrew, as he brings before Joseph the opportunity to rule the land. It is not clear from the text if Pharaoh had previous knowledge of God, but he now begins to discuss God as the source of wisdom for Joseph.

JOSEPH AND THE FAMINE (42–44)

As a famine develops north of Egypt, there is the opportunity for the family of Joseph and his brothers to move down and to borrow or buy food from the great breadbasket of the ancient world. The brothers begin to visit Egypt, but they do not recognize Joseph. He is shaven and speaks the language of the Egyptian. He was seventeen the last time they saw him. Now he is the ruler of Egypt, second only to Pharaoh. He reads Egyptian cuneiform. He knows the wise men of Egypt, the philosophy, the music, the people, and how to think as an Egyptian. Suddenly, here are his brothers whom he recognizes, but they do not recognize him, asking to do business. Remember, the last time he saw them, they sold him into slavery.

In order to test them, he accuses them of espionage. He attacks their motivation by asserting that they want to overthrow Egypt. They convince him there is a famine in the north, that their old father has sent them down to Egypt because they are hungry. In 42:18-38, Joseph begins to supply their needs.

In chapter 44, there is the wonderful story of the silver cup of Joseph which he orders the steward to put into the sack of the youngest. They retrieve it, and there is the severe test in which Judah steps forward and says Benjamin cannot be kept in Egypt. It will break his father's heart. Judah reasons that his father only had two sons whom he really loved; one of them is dead and gone (of course, he is speaking of Joseph), and the other is this son whose name is Benjamin. Judah gave his word that Benjamin would return. Joseph is touched in his heart as he sees what has occurred to Judah, the oldest of his

brothers, and the way in which his heart has mellowed and changed over the years.

JOSEPH AND HIS BROTHERS (45—49)

Chapter 45 tells of the great scene in Egypt.

Then Joseph could not control himself before all those who stood by him, and he cried, "Have everyone go out from me." So there was no man with him when Joseph made himself known to his brothers. And he wept so loudly that the Egyptians heard it, and the household of Pharaoh heard of it. Then Joseph said to his brothers, "I am Joseph! Is my father still alive?" But his brothers could not answer him, for they were dismayed at his presence. Then Joseph said to his brothers, "Please come closer to me." And they came closer. And he said, "I am your brother Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. And now do not be grieved or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life. For the famine has been in the land these two years, and there are still five years in which there will be neither plowing nor harvesting. And God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant in the earth, and to keep you alive by a great deliverance" (45:1-7).

He continues to show this incredible trust in the providence of God. It is God who has been doing this. It is God who has brought his brothers to Egypt. It is God who has done this to save their family from hunger and from dying in Canaan.

In chapter 46, Joseph sends for Jacob and all of the family who move to Egypt. They settle in the land of Goshen where they become shepherds for the rest of Jacob's life.

In chapter 47, there is a great moment when Jacob himself blesses Pharaoh.

Then Joseph brought his father Jacob and presented him to Pharaoh; and Jacob blessed Pharaoh. And Pharaoh said to Jacob, "How many years have you lived?" So Jacob said to Pharaoh, "The years of my sojourning are one hundred and thirty; few and unpleasant have been the years of my life, nor have they attained the years that my fathers lived during the days of their sojourning." And Jacob blessed Pharaoh, and went out from his presence. So Joseph settled his father and his brothers, and gave them a possession in the land of Egypt, in the best of the land, in the land of Rameses, as Pharaoh had ordered. And Joseph provided his father and his brothers and all his father's household with food, according to their little ones (47:7-12).

Cyrus Gordon says Genesis is the key document in the world for understanding this period of

Egyptian history. The Word of God was not written in a vacuum. Genesis is a great document showing us the validity of the Word of God. It squares with history.

In chapters 48 and 49, Joseph, along with his brothers, goes before Jacob. Jacob blesses his sons.

All these are the twelve tribes of Israel, and this is what their father said to them when he blessed them. He blessed them, everyone with the blessing appropriate to him (49:28).

Then Jacob dies.

JOSEPH AND JACOB (50)

Then Joseph fell on his father's face, and wept over him and kissed him (50:1).

Joseph had spent most of his life away from his father. He did not even know if his dad was living. He had seventeen years with his father, and at the very end of his life he had time with him. But, most of his life, Joseph did not even know if Jacob was living. But he loved him, and when Jacob died, he threw himself on the body of Jacob and wept loudly.

Joseph was able to cry. He was able to show his emotions and his feelings. Here is a real man, and twice in these last few chapters of Genesis, he wept and cried so loudly that even the household of Pharaoh could hear him. He is a great man of feeling and emotion.

In the latter part of this chapter, we read of Joseph's death. Notice that unlike the Hebrew burial, he is buried as an Egyptian, which means that he is embalmed.

So Joseph died at the age of one hundred and ten years; and he was embalmed and placed in a coffin in Egypt (50:26).

What does the story of Joseph teach us?

First, people disappoint us. Everybody disappointed Joseph including his older brothers, the cupbearer, Potiphar, and others. People disappoint. You cannot put your ultimate hope in people.

Second, greatness is always forged in the furnace of disappointment. The great man, Joseph, faced many failures and problems. He was accused of adultery and fornication. No one

around him understood him. Greatness is always forged in the furnace of failures, problems, and disappointments. Some of the greatest people we know are people who have gone through unemployment, illness, difficulty, family hardships like Joseph.

Third, love is stronger than hate. The brothers of Joseph hated him. He loved them, and he won the great battle. In any given moment, violence and hatred may seem to win, but love always surfaces as the final winner. No wonder so much Scripture encourages us to love each other, because love is stronger than hate.

Fourth, you are greater than your circumstances. Joseph could have asked, "Why am I in prison? What am I doing here? Don't I ever have an answered prayer anymore?" But he knew that God was greater than his circumstances. Daily circumstances may be basically the same for many people. The difference in people is in their attitude toward their situations. The wind is constant. The difference is in the set of your sails.

Fifth, God guides the events of life. He guided the events of Joseph's life, and that same God is in control today. Does He move in mysterious ways? Sometimes He must get us isolated to get our attention. Why did Joseph go down to Egypt? Why did he want to know the cupbearer? Why did he want to know Pharaoh? Why did he want to interpret his dreams? Why is Joseph placed in high position? Why does a famine take place in the north? Why does Jacob's family go to Egypt for bread? The providence of God is a mystery. God is guiding the events in the lives of the great man Joseph.

CONCLUSION

"The great story" is the story of Genesis. The story begins with man and God in close relationship with each other. Sin and rebellion interrupt that relationship. But God, based on His own nature of mercy and love, provides for another way for the relationship to be reestablished. He makes promises to man and asks for man to have faith in them. Those promises include the building of a great nation through whom the entire world will be blessed. Genesis ends where it begins. God and man are in close relationship, and God is about to build a great nation through whom Jesus will come.

—Prentice A. Meador, Jr.

QUOTATIONS

"Character grows in the soil of experience, with the fertilization of example, the moisture of desire, and the sunshine of satisfaction."

"Who so craveth wealth is like a man who drinks sea water."

"Pleasure can be bought at a price; happiness is priceless."

"Make chariot wheels out of your difficulties and ride to success."

Dr. Bob Jones, Sr.

"The best way out is always through."

Robert Frost

"Many times a day I realize how much my own inner and outer life is built upon the labors of my fellowmen both living and dead, and how earnestly I must exert myself in order to give in return as much as I have received. All truly noble people are conscious of their indebtedness."

Albert Einstein

"Few things make us feel better than having our judgment vindicated."

"The great end of life is not knowledge, but action."

T. H. Huxley

"When trial or tragedy strikes, it is what we have been before that determines how we will react. When the storms of adversity beat on us, it will be the foundations of our life that will sustain and enable us to endure."

Henry Gariepy,
Portraits of Perseverance

"In the semitic languages there is no word for *compromise*, because the idea does not exist, and that in the thought of the semitic peoples grey is not a colour."

E. F. Bishop

"Divert daily. Withdraw weekly. Abandon annually."

Baker James Cauthen